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“The Free State of New Orleans”: Local Law Enforcement and Illegal Gambling in the
1920s

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
In partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
In
History

By

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Abstract

This thesis examines illegal gambling in New Orleans and surrounding parishes in the 1920s. It will focus on a series of raids mounted by the Louisiana National Guard to end illegal gambling in both St. Bernard and Jefferson Parishes in August and November of 1928 and again in February of 1929. Corrupt leadership and public toleration allowed gambling houses in both St. Bernard and Jefferson parishes to operate openly for nearly an entire decade. Pressure from economic, religious and civic organizations within the city of New Orleans forced newly elected Governor Huey P. Long to take swift action in the fight to end gambling in Jefferson and St. Bernard Parishes.

Keywords: Southeastern United States, Louisiana, History

Introduction

Throughout history, cities have been the cultural centers of most complex societies. The state of Louisiana was no different. In the 1920s New Orleans was already rich with history and one of the largest cities in the south. New Orleans maintained its cultural dominance as Louisiana's only true city until the mid twentieth century. In 1920 New Orleans was the United States second largest port. New Orleans exported over 1,000,000,000 tons annually, 250,000,000 tons more than Philadelphia and 300,000,000 tons more than Galveston, its closest southern competitor.¹

The people of the Crescent City and the outlying parishes raised sensual indulgences to a high art form. Many Louisianans considered the consumption of alcohol a favorite form of recreation. As far back as the colonial period enormous quantities of liquor and wine were imported through New Orleans. Prostitution, another indulgence enjoyed by all classes of citizens, was practiced openly during the early twentieth century in the city of New Orleans. Despite laws against brothels, the city authorities made little attempt to close the houses with the exception of an occasional raid.²

Another diversion rampant in South Louisiana during the early twentieth century was gambling. Gambling gave visitors another reason to think of the city as sinful. Professional gamblers worked diligently to find a steady stream of suckers. Much like their feelings towards prohibition, locals in New Orleans adopted a tolerant attitude toward the pleasures of illegal gambling during the 1920s. During the 1920s

there were a variety of gambling devices and games readily available to take a person's money. Anyone interested in making a bet legally could do so with one of the bookies at the Fair Grounds racetrack. More commonly, however, a bet was made illegally through one of several less prominent handbooks. As long as the operators of these illegal activities contributed to the local politicians around election time they were allowed to conduct business as usual. If the operators failed to make a contribution, the police moved in and ended their operations.³

The leading form of gambling in New Orleans was betting on horses. Betting on horses was legal at the Fair Grounds racetrack and illegal but tolerated away from the racetrack. The lines between politics and gambling were always blurred. The Business Men's Racing Association, which ran the betting operations at the Fair Grounds race track, had close ties to Mayor Martin Behrman and his political machine. One of the association's directors, A. B. Letellier, was Martin Burman's a close associate. Placide Frigerio, the track superintendant, was a known gambler and bookmaker and was described by the *Times Picayune* as the king of Royal Street handbook operations. A third director, Arturo Del' Orto, was a known associate of a Barronne Street gambler and well known prize-fight promoter. In a speech delivered in New Orleans in 1920, newly- elected Governor John Parker addressed the machine's influence over racing in the city: "If racing is to be saved as a clean decent sport for New Orleans it must be cleansed of Behrmanized politics and cut loose from underworld allies."⁴

Gambling away from the racetrack also flourished in the Crescent City. Hundreds of handbook operations operated throughout the city. Handbooks operated

both downtown and in residential areas, but concentrated in areas around the business district. A person could walk from Poydras to Canal Street and hear races being called out at nearly a dozen different locations along the way.⁵

Handbooks operated in several different ways. Most common were single operators who did not maintain any office. These single operators usually served a limited clientele by calling their homes or places of business. Customers of these small operations were generally limited to small bettors usually wagering no more than \$1 or \$2. Other small handbook operators did their business out of soft drink stands, speakeasies, groceries and charter clubs. Small operators needed very little capital to run their business. Soft drink stands, grocery stores and other businesses that allowed these handbooks to operate did so at no charge. Business owners liked the high volume of traffic these handbooks brought into their business. If they had a bad week, the operators would skip town rather than lose money.⁶

Somewhere between the racetrack and the handbook operations were the poolrooms. Poolroom is a misleading title as very little pool was ever played in its rooms. The patrons of these poolrooms were often preoccupied with betting on races. A typical poolroom was furnished with a blackboard, telephone telegraph, ticker tape, chairs, slips of paper and racing forms with the latest race information. On the corner of Royal and Iberville in the French Quarter was the Union Bankers' Club. The club was located on the second floor and was a front for the Johnny Abrams poolroom. At first glance the club looked like a pool hall except for the vast number of empty tables. Patrons at the Union Bankers Club were found eyeing the big board with the latest racing odds.⁷

Another front for bookmaking operations in New Orleans was charter clubs. Charter clubs received a charter from the city to operate friendly card games. Limited to a small number of registered members, the city government initially viewed the card games held in the charter clubs as a way for police to keep track of the gambling going on in town. The reality is the chartered clubs served as fronts for a variety of illegal gambling games. Handbooks, lotteries, and banked card games operated openly on the premises with non-registered members.

Despite toleration by the majority of the public, not everyone believed that gambling was a good thing for the New Orleans area. Some groups began to voice their disapproval of both legal and illegal gambling. The first organization to publicly speak out was the Young Men's Business Club. The club, founded in 1919, was an organization of about 150 businessmen. The club demanded that existing laws prohibiting illegal gambling be enforced. The organization also urged the passage of a law prohibiting the publication and circulation of racing information. Other organizations such as Kiwanis, Rotary, and the Association of Commerce all took an anti-gambling stance.⁸

The business opposition in New Orleans felt gambling brought a negative impact on the local economy. Businesses were concerned that gambling would take money away from legitimate businesses. The chairman of the Association of Commerce, W. S. Bender, summed up the organization's stance on gambling. "The licentiousness which exists in our community is sapping the lifeblood of business." The Association of Commerce reaffirmed its stand against commercialized illegal gambling

and invited other clubs including the American Legion and the Young Men's Business club to join in its fight against illegal gambling in New Orleans and surrounding parish. At this meeting the association discussed various methods for controlling gambling on a permanent basis. Orleans Parish District Attorney, Eugene Stanley, expressed willingness to cooperate with all three organizations. The Association of Commerce's anti-gambling committee asked the district attorney to take up the gambling problem with a grand jury. The association issued an open invitation for anyone with any knowledge of illegal gambling. The grand jury's request received no response⁹.

Other business groups argued that gambling was a breeding ground for crime. Parent-teacher associations as well as religious groups also opposed illegal gambling. Reports of gambling among school children and the effect gambling could have on the city's youth were concerns of some New Orleanians. The Ministerial Union of New Orleans took a strong stand against race tracks and their "associated influences." The union argued that: "We believe this institution is a mischievous power in politics; that it operates a sinister influence in the making and enforcing of laws designed for the well being of our citizenship."¹⁰ The ministers saw the racetrack as responsible for several scandals that have had great effect on the city. They felt that gambling would lead to a higher rate of crime and would keep potential businesses away from the city costing the local economy millions of dollars. The Ministerial Union made a plea to the citizens of New Orleans to "pull together for prosperity."¹¹

The local newspapers added to the public pressure. The press took on the growing issue of handbook operators. The *Item* argued that the only way to put a stop

to handbooks was to make illegal the transmission of what the paper termed racing “dope.” Dope referred to any form charts, racing forms or betting odds sent by telephone telegraph and printed in the local papers such as its competitor, the *Times Picayune*. Of course, the *Times Picayune* disagreed; the paper argued that even weak laws needed to be enforced. The paper was critical of what it referred to as “handbook crusade farces,” raids by local police at the urging of local on-track gamblers that they be protected from off-track betting. The paper reiterated its position that local laws were adequate to handle the problem if consistently enforced.¹²

Pressure from a minority of the public, likely a majority of the voting public, forced each succeeding city administration to take a stand against all illegal gambling. As a result of the consistent inconsistent pressure, a pattern emerged of occasional enforcement throughout the 1920s. Despite sporadic raids, rarely was any illegal operation forced to shut down permanently.

Most gambling located in the city of New Orleans was done on a small scale. When arrested, many operators had only a small amount of cash seized. For most the rewards greatly outweighed the risk. Once outside the city limits in the parishes of St. Bernard and Jefferson, gambling operated on a much grander scale. Gambling houses sported elaborate decors and could be compared favorably to any casino. Not all Louisianans liked gambling. However, most felt people should have the right to gamble if they liked. Although people from the north of the state generally disapproved, horseracing, card games, and rolls of the dice also separated the people throughout Louisiana from their money.

The control of gambling in New Orleans and surrounding parishes proved a difficult task for local police forces. Unlike gambling in other parts of the country, gambling in Orleans, St. Bernard, and Jefferson parishes was not run by an organized criminal underworld. Gambling in South Louisiana was run by anyone with the means and desire. In New Orleans you could buy a carton of milk and place a bet on a horse at any grocery in town. Handicapped by corrupt leadership and public tolerance, local law enforcement officers failed to stop illegal gambling in St. Bernard and Jefferson parishes throughout the 1920s.

Huey Long won the governorship of Louisiana as a result of the election of 1928. Upon taking office Governor Long warned, "Let New Orleans come into court with clean hands and I will give all my resources, and back the city to the limit in suppressing gambling."¹³ So Governor Long responded to accusations of the New Orleans Association of Commerce to halt illegal gambling in St. Bernard and Jefferson Parishes. W. S. Bender, chairman of the Association of Commerce's anti-gambling committee, sent a letter informing the governor that the anti-gambling commission had evidence that gambling halls were operating in "flagrant" violation of the law and with knowledge of local law enforcement officials. Mr. Bender's accusations specifically referred to the clubs in the 100 block of Friscoville in Arabi: The Riverside Club, the Jai-Ali Club, the Arabi Club and the St. Bernard Country Club and similar clubs in Jefferson Parish. These sites were outside the police jurisdiction of the New Orleans Police, but were easily accessible for any resident of Orleans Parish willing to make a short trip.

In response to the Governor's statement, Superintendent of Police, Thomas Healy issued orders that the lid be clamped tight on all illegal gambling enterprises in New Orleans. To better fight his newly declared war on gambling the superintendent assembled a squad of detectives to go after all handbook operations and the operators of any drink stands that housed book-making operations. Superintendent Healy also wanted to go after drug stores permitting punch boards and slot machines to operate in their establishments. On the first day of raids the New Orleans police department made four arrests on charges of operating a handbook. Police arrested Frank Brothers in the rear of a soft drink stand for operating a handbook. He was found with four pads containing bets on the day's races. Jerry Marula was charged with operating a business without a license. Anthony Pizzo and Charles Baragona were both arrested for operating a handbook. Very few dice games existed in the city of New Orleans. Gambling houses in the surrounding parishes, however, still offered dice games and roulette behind their open doors.¹⁴

Corruption and Gambling in St. Bernard Parish

Bordering New Orleans, located in St. Bernard Parish was the town of Arabi. Although no geographic divide separated Orleans and St. Bernard Parishes, the areas were vastly different. In the 1920s, St. Bernard had only a handful of streets, and none were paved. The streets were lined with crushed shells that eventually hardened like concrete. Open ditches that ran alongside the street provided drainage for the parish. People in St. Bernard drank from cisterns, which had been outlawed in New Orleans since 1905.¹⁵

In spite of all of its shortcomings, the town of Arabi thrived. Arabi had been part of Orleans Parish until it was re-zoned as part of St. Bernard Parish in the 1880s. In the late 19th century slaughterhouses became illegal in Orleans Parish. Butchers and others interested in the maintenance of the slaughterhouse industry managed to have the area of Arabi re-zoned into St. Bernard. Acres of pigs and cattle and the largest abattoirs in the south supplied several hundred jobs in the area. Arabi was also home to one of the largest sugar refineries in the world, which employed more than 1500 people in the 1920s. During the heat of summer the smell of blood, rotted meat, and the sticky sweet sugar cane hung in the air, attracting rats and a vast number of insects.¹⁶

Once south of Arabi, St. Bernard Parish became rural and turned into marsh. In the 1920s, St. Bernard Parish encompassed an area of 617 square miles, 544 of which were marsh or swamp. The swamps were thick with cypress and hanging moss and

were infested with alligators, snakes, and a green velvety scum. The marshes appeared solid but could be navigated only by an experienced person.¹⁷

Perhaps those most experienced in navigating the marshes of St. Bernard were the Isleños¹⁸. The Isleños came to Louisiana in the 1700's when the area was under Spanish colonial control. Delacroix Island was the largest Isleños settlement in the parish. It was not literally an island, but in fact a peninsula. Delacroix is located at the "end of the world," a reference to the fact that the road in Delacroix runs into the marsh. In the 1920s Delacroix had a school but no electricity, post office or telephones. Despite their lack of education and appliances, the Isleños of Delacroix Island amassed small fortunes through the fur business. During the 1920s, Louisiana produced more fur for coats than any other state. The governor of Louisiana made \$7,500 a year while the best trappers in the area could make that much in a good season from November to March. St. Bernard Parish also thrived from business beyond the export of sugar and furs. The parish also ran a thriving, though illegal, import business. During the 1920s Delacroix Island became the focus of outside attention as the area began supplying the American demand for prohibited liquor.¹⁹

In 1920, when the Louisiana legislature voted to ratify the 18th amendment prohibiting the sale of alcohol, it seemed like the "unlikeliest crusade."²⁰ At the time the amendment passed, New Orleans was home to an estimated 5,000 bars. The fight to rid the city of one of its most profitable and most popular commodities proved to be a struggle. When Issador Einstein, who became one of the most effective undercover prohibition agents in America, arrived in New Orleans, he asked his cab driver where

he could by a drink. The story goes that the driver offered to sell him a pint he had in the car.²¹

With St. Bernard's labyrinth of inlets and bayous, smuggling alcohol into the parish became a lucrative trade. An easy exchange existed between the Isleños of Delacroix Island and Cubans, the main suppliers of contraband alcohol, because of the location of the island. Bootlegging went on to become a respected profession in St. Bernard.

Manual Molero emerged as one of the most powerful bootleggers in the south. Molero was an illiterate Isleño from Delacroix Island who barely spoke English. Before Prohibition, Molero made his living buying vegetables in St. Bernard and selling them for a significant profit in New Orleans' French Market. A prominent business man from New Orleans described Molero as a man with "absolutely no education had a terrible Spanish accent you could barely understand. He and his partners were the biggest bootleggers around, really thugs, running shiploads of booze. But he was very smart, and very proper in business dealings."²² Molero was later credited with devising a maneuver to cut oil taxes that was later copied by the Chase Manhattan Bank.

Molero's biggest rival for control in St. Bernard was Sheriff L.A. Meraux. Sheriff Meraux and his deputies charged a toll on all whisky that was shipped out of the parish. According to author John Barry, Meraux mastered "careful ruthlessness." Meraux was a physician, a graduate of Tulane University, who had studied in London, Paris and Berlin. Later he did medical research at John Hopkins before returning to St. Bernard where his lust for power reshaped the course of his life.

In 1905, a yellow fever epidemic struck New Orleans. Meraux returned to the city's Charity Hospital to help fight the outbreak. Rather than return to his research, Meraux became a ruthless real estate entrepreneur and the largest landowner in St. Bernard. His ambition prompted Meraux to run for sheriff of St. Bernard in the 1920s.²³

Sheriff Meraux got arrested for attempting to bribe a prohibition agent, offering him \$10,000 for advance warning of roadblocks. Much to Meraux's surprise the prohibition agent was honest. Meraux, along with three of his deputies and a New Orleans police captain, were arrested. The three deputies were charged but the charges on Meraux were dropped. While under federal indictment for conspiracy to violate national prohibition laws, the sheriff testified that with his salary he could not patrol the Gulf the marsh and the highways while helping federal officers. Meraux stated that he had to pay deputies out of his own salary. Meraux concluded that, "you have to have money to be sheriff, or you have to rob a whole lot."²⁴

Though lucrative, and mostly accepted by locals, bootlegging could be a risky business. Hijackers who stole liquor from smugglers were considered a menace to society and dangerous to citizens. Bootlegging was such an accepted practice in St. Bernard that some more prominent bootleggers successfully had hijackers charged and tried in court. The *St. Bernard Voice* explained, "Of course the authorities are not overlooking the bootleggers, who are also violators of the law, but they are not in the same category as the highjackers, who are a menace to decent citizens."²⁵

On April 20, 1923, a caravan of trucks loaded with liquor from another prominent bootlegger and brother of Sheriff Meraux, Claude Meraux, had been stopped

by deputies on their way to New Orleans. A struggle ensued, and two of the deputies died, first shot, then run over by the trucks. Claude Meraux was indicted as an accessory to murder. Upon his indictment Meraux fled to Paris. He returned to St. Bernard a short time later and won an election for district judge in the election immediately following his indictment.²⁶

Another form of big business in St. Bernard was gambling. Like running alcohol, gambling was illegal and practiced openly in the parish. A number of gambling clubs operated openly and with the knowledge of law enforcement officers in the 100 block of Friscoville Avenue, in Arabi, including the River View, the 118 Club, the 102 Club, the Candlelight Club, the Arabi Club, and the largest of gaming halls, the Jai-Alai(Hi-Li) Club.

The clubs in St. Bernard operated openly for years and with little fear of prosecution. One newspaper referred to the clubs in Arabi as the "Monte Carlo" of New Orleans. Unlike the clubs in New Orleans, anyone was welcome in Arabi. As long as a customer had money to lose he was welcome in the clubs of St. Bernard. There were games of chance for a penny if that was all you had as long as you played you could stay. An advertisement ran in the *TimesPicayune*, that read;

"Come all ye who hunger to gamble, for to ye who have, the doors of my kingdom of chance shall be forever open. From the law ye shall be protected, and thy lust shall be satisfied. In turn it shall be given ye to accept the risk of my diverse games, and to feed the parasites of my realm.

Whether a cent or a million for a fortune, come ye, prepared to give freely of means, for it is written that whosoever entereth my kingdom shall, out of treachery of my fun and the cupidity of underlings, contribute bountifully to this underworld of my creation. –From the Mandates of the House of Bagneris”²⁷

This ad touted an establishment run by Louis Bagneris located at North Peters and Esteban streets in Arabi.

Although gambling in Arabi operated in the open, it was not always done without consequence. In 1920, Louis Bagneris, faced indictments on three counts: a charge of operating a poolroom, permitting gambling and crap games on the premises and operating banking games and a banking house. Bagneris, a repeat offender, was convicted on similar charges when his establishment was raided in 1916 on the orders of Governor Luther E. Hall.²⁸

Along with Bagneris, two other local gambling impresarios also had indictments brought against them. Julien Cazenove, owner of the Chalmette restaurant in Arabi, was indicted for operating banking games and a banking house and for allowing crap games on his premises. A third indictment was brought against Louis St. German, whom was charged with operating slot machines at both a grocery store and a feed store. The owners of the store each received a fine for their participation in the operations. As court opened in St. Bernard, Judge Leander Perez asked the grand jury to investigate “the long and prevalent appalling conditions of gambling and vice.”²⁹

The investigations attracted crowds that packed the courthouse. Judge Perez charged the grand jury to leave no stone unturned and to get to the bottom of existing

conditions of gambling in St. Bernard parish. When witnesses were asked to come forward, everyone seemed to have developed amnesia. The judge urged witnesses to inform local authorities if they were intimidated in any way to keep quiet.³⁰

Following pressure from anti-gambling groups on the newly- elected Governor Huey Long to halt gambling in New Orleans, gamblers and crusaders alike turned their attention to St. Bernard. As a result of the closing down of games within the city limits, gamblers flocked in large numbers to the gambling halls of St. Bernard. One of the larger establishments of the parish even offered bus service from Canal Street to the gaming halls in Arabi. A stash of cash and weapons were reported to be on hand to service customers and fend off any would be bandits.³¹

On July 27, 1928, Sheriff L. A. Meraux shut down the clubs in Arabi. Sheriff Meraux gave a statement that he ordered every form of gambling ceased in St. Bernard. However, Governor Long, speaking in Baton Rouge, stated that it was he who ordered Sheriff Meraux to shut down operations in St. Bernard. The governor also declared that he would stop at nothing to stop illegal gambling, even if he had to call out the state militia in order to do so.³²

Right on cue, despite warnings from the governor and the sheriff, gaming in Arabi resumed, although two of the larger clubs in the 100 block of Friscoville were operational. The Jai-Alai and the Arabi club were open for business. Keno, the favorite game of most of the parish regulars, was not in operation. The reasons given were small pay outs and the fact that a customer can play for hours with little risk. At the Arabi club only few games were available, although the rewards were high. The club

seeming to be on the winning end of the action taking place that night. The story at the Jai-Alai was not much different although one table was unlucky for the house with a few players walking away with winnings in the hundreds.³³

The Jai -Alai club casino complex stood on the property adjacent to the Lebeau house, which in the twenties was known as the "Cardone Hotel." During the height of the gambling era, the hotel was used as a boarding house for dealers who worked in the many casinos and to the Cuban refugees that played Jai-Alai in the arena located in the rear of the club. During intervals between raids by law enforcement, the gambling business in Arabi boomed.³⁴

In 1928, despite repeated warnings from Governor Huey Long to end gambling in Louisiana, the clubs in Arabi continued to operate openly. Several clubs continued to advertise in local newspapers. After issuing a final warning to gambling houses throughout the New Orleans area, the governor decided to put an end to gambling in St. Bernard.

On August 12, 1928 Governor Long gave an order to Adjutant General Raymond H. Fleming of the Louisiana National Guard to conduct anti-gambling raids. According to the governor, "My order to Adjutant General Fleming stands until it is revoked. The militia will keep St. Bernard Parish under surveillance to be sure that commercialized gambling is not resumed. And if it becomes necessary to stop gambling in other parishes I will issue orders to the National Guard to go into these parishes and act just as they did in St. Bernard."³⁵

August 12, 1928 began in St. Bernard like any other day. The sugar refinery was operating at a full capacity, the slaughter houses were operating, and trappers and fishermen on the lower end of the parish remained busy. On Friscoville Avenue the Jai-Alai and Arabi Clubs were open for business, and crowded with only a few idle tables. Dealers dealt cards, spun roulette wheels and patrons rolled dice across the tables. Suddenly Louisiana Guardsmen, equipped with charts and diagrams showing all entrances and exits of the two clubs, arrived on the scene in two trucks. A shot rang out. As the doors to the clubs swung open, a guardsman armed with a pistol shouted out a warning: "If you want to shoot it out we are willing, but let's have no trouble."³⁶ The raids were coordinated to occur simultaneously. The clubs, located across the street from each other were entered first by officers whom ordered all players to stay exactly where they were. Once inside men and women were sent to different sections of the club. All of the game operators were gathered into a separate corner of the club.

Shortly after gaining entrance into the Arabi Club, Guardsmen quickly discovered a small armory. In the cage was a lookout armed with a small rifle, a shotgun, and a revolver. According to the lookout, his duty was to repel bandits. He shouted that he had no interest in resisting the Guardsmen.³⁷

The raiders seized more than \$4,800 from the tables of the Jai-alai and seized \$865 from the Arabi club. The guard sized over \$1,000 from slot machines collected from the two clubs; the Guardsmen later destroyed the machines at the Jackson Barracks. Adjutant General Fleming collected the money and deposited it into the state treasury. Other paraphernalia seized included a cabinet containing a quantity of keno cards and

buttons, three roulette tables and wheels, twenty four slot machines, five dice tables, nine boxes of chips, one bag of dice, seven sheet iron money boxes several dice and change racks, all from the Jai-Alai club. Guardsmen in the Arabi club seized three dice tables, seven slot machines, three dice tables, four roulette tables, one keno table, and over 10,000 chips.³⁸

Lieutenant Colonel E.P. Roy, an assistant adjutant general, aided Adjutant General Flemming by keeping a log of all money and paraphernalia seized. Lieutenant Colonel Roy also made a list of all patrons present and of those operating the establishments. Patrons were asked three questions. Who are you? What you do? Where you live? C.V. Kenny admitted to operating the Arabi club. Joseph W. Brown admitted to running the Jai-Alai. According to the *Times Picayune*, the two men were warned not to reopen their respective clubs on Saturday. Despite the warning, both men opened their doors on the 12th of August 1928. There had not been a raid on a gambling house in St. Bernard parish since 1916.³⁹

The 1928 raid, ordered by Governor Long, proceeded as planned. For a moment after the Guardsmen had entered the Jai-Alai club, a riot spread across the floor. Before the situation came under control, a mob attacked Neil Simes, a staff photographer for the *Times-Picayune*. Simes' camera was smashed, and he was knocked unconscious. X-rays revealed that there were no broken ribs but doctors were sure Simes nose was broken. Local police arrested the photographer's main attacker, Maurice Rubion. According to police, Rubion had been arrested six times on various charges, including

disturbing the peace and loitering. The district attorney of St. Bernard, Claude Meraux, vowed to prosecute Maurice Roubion for his part in the attack on Neil Simes.⁴⁰

To ensure the clubs could not re-open, the Guardsmen destroyed all the paraphernalia they had collected. A bonfire outside of both clubs destroyed all the material that would burn. Those items that would not burn were gathered up and brought into the barracks where they were hacked to pieces with hammers and axes by the members of the National Guard. Following the raid, Governor Long stated: "Let this be a warning to all gamblers in the New Orleans area of the way I will enforce the laws of Louisiana when the civil authorities fail to do their duty. Gambling is halted in St. Bernard Parish. It will remain closed while I am Governor."⁴¹

The operator of the Jai-Alai Club made a trip to General Fleming's office to try and recover his seized items. Mr. Brown asked the general what he could do to "protect" himself and get back in business. General Fleming responded that he would continue to follow his orders to stop gambling in St. Bernard and Jefferson for as long as they stood. The general advised Mr. Brown that if he wanted to get back into business his best way would be to "get the heck out of Louisiana."⁴²

Sheriff of St. Bernard Parish, Dr. L.A. Meraux, responded to the raid in a statement to the press. "It is my custom to visit the interior and outlying posts of the parish at weekends. I left Arabi late Saturday afternoon, intending to return Monday morning. On learning today of last night's happenings at Arabi, I came back as quickly as possible and have just arrived."⁴³ The sheriff's statement continued: "I regret sincerely that certain persons took advantage of my absence and violated the anti-

gambling laws. I thoroughly approve of Governor Long's action and he and the people of the state may rest assured that even if I have to abandon my weekend vacations there will be no repetition of law breaking in the parish while I occupy the office of sheriff."⁴⁴ Sheriff Meraux's promises did not hold true. As the years went on, so too did the gambling on the 100 block of Friscoville.

The Free State of Jefferson

St. Bernard was not the only parish adjacent to Orleans where illegal gambling became a thriving industry. In 1920, when Governor John Parker took office, he made it his mission to put an end to illegal gambling in Jefferson parish. For the governor gambling was more than just about flouting the law. Parker saw gambling as a moral issue. Governor Parker gave a speech which he referred to gambling as an “an untold misery to innocent women and children,”⁴⁵ and blamed the vice for ruining the future of young boys and the lives of several good men. Impressed by the newly-elected sheriff of Jefferson parish, Governor Parker pledged his support to Sheriff J. B. Dauenhauer. However, the governor warned that if the sheriff failed, the governor would certainly not.

It did not take long to see that things had not really changed in Jefferson Parish. In early 1921 Sheriff Dauenhauer raided the Metairie Country Club. Once he arrived, the sheriff reported that he only found private legal poker games being conducted. Frustrated with the sheriff’s lack of evidence, other Jefferson officials took matters into their own hands. In March of 1921, Parish Attorney Conrad Buchler, State Senator Allen Johanes and the mayor of Gretna, Charles Gelbke, raided the same Metairie Country Club. They found more than legal poker games. The Jefferson officials were able to confiscate a great deal of gambling equipment, including roulette tables and betting chips. This same group brought an injunction against the Metairie Country Club. However, the judge in the case dismissed their request.⁴⁶

As the investigations into illegal gambling in Jefferson Parish continued, indictments had been made against a few individuals. First to be indicted was Fred Miller, the operator of the Metairie Country Club. The grand jury ruled in favor of Mr. Miller and denied widespread gambling existed in Jefferson Parish. Instead the grand jury decided to go after Meigs O. Frost, a reporter for a New Orleans newspaper, Frost had testified as a witness for the state on rampant gambling in the parish. In essence, the grand jury indicted the man responsible for testifying about the existence of illegal gambling in Jefferson. In absolute disbelief of the grand jury's findings, the New Orleans press argued that two members of the grand jury had pending criminal charges at the time they were conducting the investigation. The *Times Picayune* chimed in further, issuing a statement: "Throughout the state, and wherever men and women dwell who know the 'free state of Jefferson' either through personal contact with its dives or by its notorious reputation, this solemn affirmation of its immaculateness and absolute freedom from the vice of gambling will win, we are sure the tribute of grins and guffaws."⁴⁷

After failed attempts in parish courts and with the grand jury, those in opposition to gambling in Jefferson parish brought their case to the state legislature. The state would attempt to show that lawlessness and gambling existed under Sheriff Dauenhauer. The sheriff was the only witness to testify on his behalf. He argued that conditions in Jefferson had improved since he was elected sheriff. Dauenhauer insisted that he had raided the Metairie Country Club on three occasions and had found no evidence of illegal gambling. Despite testimony to the contrary by Meigs O. Frost and

Governor Parker, the House Committee found that the sheriff had no direct involvement in allowing gambling to continue in Jefferson parish. Some concerned citizens of Jefferson parish continued to fight the existence of illegal gambling throughout the 1920s. The fight was renewed in 1928 with the election of new Governor Huey Long and Sheriff Frank Clancy.⁴⁸

Governor Long recognized that rampant gambling continued in Jefferson parish. The governor made a late trip to New Orleans on the night of November 10, 1928 and met with Adjunct General Ray H. Fleming of the National Guard. Swooping in on two gambling halls in the parish around 1:00 a. m., forty National Guard troops raided two clubs operating in the parish. The first was the Metairie Inn. The raiders found no gambling at the Metairie Inn, but quickly learned that games were being conducted around the corner at Fargo's Grocery store. The Guardsmen surrounded the place and detained forty individuals, who were released after questioning. The second target was the Beverly Gardens. When the Guardsmen, led by General Fleming, arrived at the Gardens, patrons hastily found open windows and doors. The National Guardsmen seized truck loads of paraphernalia, including dice and roulette tables. They detained the men in charge of operating the games. The proprietor of the resort, Tom Getz, declared that there was no gambling going on in the Beverly Gardens and that the materials seized had been stored in the rear of the establishment. In a phone call to the *Times Picayune*, the governor admitted that he was unsure if this would put an end to illegal gambling in Jefferson parish, but he and his militia would stop gambling anywhere it flourished in the state of Louisiana.⁴⁹

On February 8, 1929 in defiance of a warning given by Sheriff Frank J. Clancy several gambling halls in Jefferson operated at full capacity. Just two hours after the clubs opened, around 10:30 p.m., Sheriff Clancy entered the Riverside Inn and arrested Felix Palmisano, who was one of the owners of the establishment. As Sheriff Clancy left the Riverside Inn with Mr. Palmisano in custody, other patrons shouted: "why don't you raid the other places."⁵⁰ The other places were in reference to Rudy O'Dwyer's Southport Club, Jack Sheehan's Suburban Gardens, and Tranchina's.

It was generally known that the sheriff intentionally ignored Rudy O'Dwyer's Original Southport Club since it is located only a few hundred feet from the Riverside Inn. The Southport Club was reported to have been running at full blast when Clancy raided the Riverside. The clubs operated with lights shining outside and the chips clinking inside as the sheriff was making his arrest next door. Witnesses present during the sheriff's raid reported that he walked quietly into the establishment, seized \$31 from the table where dice players bought chips for \$1 apiece and then proceeded to exit with Mr. Palmisano. Clancy told Al Pilsbury, whom he said was one of the operating partners, to follow him to the Gretna jail. In his haste he did not seize the dice from the table. Al Pilsbury denied his partnership in the Riverside Inn. However, three others, Alex Humphrey, J. Ernest Witchen, and Alonzo C. Patterson, all claimed to be partners in the gambling hall with Palmisano and gave statements. In his statement Witchen claimed that Sheriff Clancy said that they could not open that night because the governor said that only three establishments had been allowed to operate in the parish, the Original Southport Club, the Suburban Gardens and Trancina's. Yet before this,

Witchen told reporters that the sheriff told them the Riverside Inn could operate as well.⁵¹

Once word of Witchen's statements reached the governor, he responded by ordering out the National Guard a second time in nearly as many months. Seized in the raids of the three "authorized" establishments were five dice tables and three roulette tables. Guardsmen confiscated money found on the tables, as well as other paraphernalia. The troops also found a hidden nook of drawers that hid a small arsenal of sawed-off shotguns and pistols. Nearly twenty minutes into the raid, one of the Guardsmen noticed another room with a locked door. Upon entry, two men were found sitting quietly over a small safe. Once unlocked the safe was found to contain several thousands of dollars of cash and bags of coin. Ten dice tables, three roulette tables, fifteen slot machines, stools for croupier, two large garbage cans filled with chips and another filled with black buttons used for keno were all seized and returned to the Jackson Barracks.⁵²

Sheriff Clancy issued a statement that he had issued warrants for the arrest of Al Pilsbury, Alex Humphrey, Alonso C. Patterson, and J. Ernest Witchen, the co-owners of the Riverside Inn. The sheriff stated emphatically that all gaming halls in Jefferson will be "closed tight." In response to the charges put forth by Mr. Witchen, Clancy responded that it was a "damn lie," and a "fantastic dream" that the governor would allow any illegal gambling halls to operate in the open in Jefferson Parish.⁵³

Only five days after the raids on the Riverside Inn, the Original Southport Club, the Suburban Gardens and Tranchina's, the governor again summoned Adjutant

General Fleming to his suit at the Roosevelt Hotel. This time General Fleming's Guard units were to strike clubs in St. Bernard and Jefferson parishes in one great raid. One club in St. Bernard, the St. Bernard Country Club, and two additional clubs in Jefferson, the Suburban Gardens and Tranchina's were to be shut down. All three places had evidence of gambling, yet the Guardsmen caught no one in the act of gambling at any of the three establishments. Three squads each consisting of about fifteen Guardsmen raided the three clubs at approximately 10:30 p.m.. Captain Edward P. Benezech led the raid on the St. Bernard Country Club. There was no gambling found, but the Guard confiscated all paraphernalia found. J. M. Berlin, manager of the club, Edward McLaughlin, dining room manager; and Frank Rose, floor manager were held by the National Guard for questioning. Captain F. B. Malony led the raids at the Suburban Gardens. Again, the captain found nearly thirty people standing around but no one actively gambling. The third raid of the night was headed by Captain P. A. Daverises, who led his troops through the Tranchina club. He to found the patrons of Tranchina's ready to make a run for it, which led the Guardsmen to conclude all three clubs had been tipped off just before the Guard units arrived. All together seven army trucks loaded their beds with paraphernalia seized from the three clubs. The Guard returned all gambling paraphernalia seized to Jackson barracks and destroyed it in a bonfire.⁵⁴

Two hours after the raids ceased, Governor Long issued a statement. The governor said that, whenever militia men raided a gambling hall, they would no longer show courtesy to the players; they would be treated as criminals in the same manner as the operators had. The governor further stated: "We will not make any effort to spare

the patrons of the dens any embarrassment. They can expect the same treatment that we accord the gamblers because they are violating the laws of the state just as much.”⁵⁵

The governor’s action to call out the National Guard to end gambling in St. Bernard and Jefferson Parishes, whether seen as a success or failure, was not without consequence.

Governor Huey Long Vs Attorney General Percy Saint

Fred P. Kriss, a patron at Tranchina's, in Jefferson, threatened legal action against Governor Long for the manner in which his wife had been searched. The governor responded to Mr. Kriss' charges that every person under arrest is subject to search. Since there was no women present at the raid, Mr. Kriss' wife was escorted back to the Jackson Barracks where she was properly searched by a woman. In other circumstances the governor added that "proper" women from the city of New Orleans had been called on to perform searches on women who were being detained. In a final statement Governor Long stated that the easiest way to avoid any controversy was for the ladies to stay out of these gambling houses.⁵⁶

Willis C. Thomas, the operator of Tranchina's, filed suit to recover money seized by the National Guard. In his suit Thomas alleged that the Guard seized \$11,800 in the raid of Tranchina's not the \$5,400 as the National Guard recorded. The governor responded that he would be happy to meet these gamblers in open court with a chance to cross-examine them. He also added that there were several checks seized during the raids, but the checks bearing the signature of their makers will be offered up as evidence. The governor also stated that the Guard had specific procedures when seizing cash. When seizing cash, the Guardsmen carried a locked safe into an establishment. Commanding officers had a patron or employee of the house count the cash and place it into the Guardsmen's safe. A manager of the establishment then had to sign an itemized list of the amount seized. The governor also questioned the

integrity of anyone questioning the honesty of the “splendid youths” composing the Louisiana National Guard.⁵⁷

Governor Long’s most heated defense came against the opinion rendered by the Attorney General of Louisiana Percy Saint. The opinion in question expressed by the attorney general was that the raids in Jefferson and St. Bernard two days earlier were illegal due to the fact that the governor did not declare martial law in either parish before sending in state troops. The governor declared that, “the gamblers had best take no encouragement over Attorney General Saint’s opinion.”⁵⁸ This pronouncement by Attorney General Saint was made in reference to an opinion he had rendered to the former Adjutant General of the National Guard, General L.A. Toombs. Adjutant General Toombs inquired a year earlier as to whether a governor could order the National Guard to enter a parish and arrest individuals found operating gambling halls. In a letter dated November 23, 1927 three questions Adjutant General Toombs asked the attorney general. First, could the governor of the state order the National Guard to enter a parish and arrest individuals for “the conducting of banking games held under the law to be gambling.”⁵⁹ Second, the general asked if the attorney general’s answer was “yes,” could the guard take the “required action” if martial law is not declared by the Governor first. Finally, Toombs asked if the Attorney General’s answered “yes,” to the first two questions and the Guard proceeded with the actions in question was the guard authorized under the law to arrest any individual or individuals found to be engaged in gambling.⁶⁰

Attorney General Saint responded by referring to Section 14 of Article 3 of the Louisiana State Constitution of 1921. According to the States Bill of Rights, "The military shall be subordinate to the civil power."⁶¹ In essence a member of the National Guard has no more authority than an ordinary citizen unless they are called into active service by the governor. The National Guard would have no power to make arrest. Any law enforcement official, sheriff, or deputy would have civil power and would have authority over the National Guard. As to the Adjutant General's second question the answer was no-the guard has no authority to take action without martial law first being declared. The Attorney General concluded that if it were not for section 14 of the states Bill of Rights, the National Guard could be used for "great abuse" of power and oppression. Without first issuing a proclamation of martial law the Governor cannot supersede the civil authority. In order to give the National Guard any authority equal to or above that of the civil power the governor must declare martial law.⁶²

The Attorney General questioned some of the guardsmen involved in the raids in Jefferson and St. Bernard in his office at the Orleans parish civil court building. When questioned as to why the guardsmen would be questioned in his office and not at the criminal court building in Gretna, Lieutenant Colonel E. P. Roy stated that the military cannot be summoned to appear. "We were requested to confer with the attorney general and we acceded to that request. We were not summoned."⁶³ Adjutant General Fleming was out of town during the attorney general's questioning. Lieutenant Colonel Roy reiterated that the Guardsmen informed the Attorney General as to what they had found and they acted under the orders of the governor. He explained to the Attorney

General that the National Guard was under orders of the governor who was commander in chief and the governor ordered the raids made.⁶⁴

Governor Long responded to the accusations of Attorney General Saint by stating: "The Constitution of Louisiana provides that the governor shall be the commander in chief of the militia and shall have the power to call the militia into active service for the preservation of law and order, to repel invasion and to suppress insurrection."⁶⁵ He then added: "We have paid no attention to and will pay no attention to, any opinion of the attorney general, protecting gambling interests, or which would make it impossible for us to enforce the laws in this state."⁶⁶ In a final statement before he was nearly impeached for his use of the National Guard in shutting down the gaming establishments, the governor pleaded that the local press wanted gambling ended, the association of commerce wanted gambling ended, and the church wanted gambling ended and admitted that he had "so little sense" he thought they actually wanted the gambling halls closed. The impeachment article was eventually voted down in the House by a vote of 55-43.⁶⁷

Initially the governor had the backing of the local newspapers. The *Times Picayune* wrote that they hoped that the governor would follow through on his promises to keep the establishments in Jefferson and St. Bernard closed. The *States* wrote that the governor had "no alternative" in sending in troops into St. Bernard. However, following the February 9, 1929 raids the view of the *States* began to change. A rift had already existed between the paper's editor, Colonel Robert Ewing, who had been a strong supporter of the governor during his campaign. Colonel Ewing saw

himself as a prime minister who could control the young governor as he saw fit.⁶⁸

However, when he was not informed of the February raids, the rift between the paper and the governor grew larger. The paper accused the governor of illegally ordering the search of patrons, mainly women, stating that they had been “stripped to the skin” during searches. A competing newspaper identified the women as one of the gambler’s wives and exposed Ewing as a fraud. Ewing later charged that the governor attended a party given by the president of the Association of Commerce, when an inebriated Huey Long made his final decision to go along with the raids.⁶⁹

There are several theories as to Governor Long’s motives in ordering the raids in St. Bernard and Jefferson Parishes. Adjutant General Fleming of the National Guard felt that the governor was sincere in his intentions to put an end to illegal gambling. Some felt that the governor wanted to show the sheriffs in both parishes that he was the boss. Gambling in New Orleans had existed on a much smaller scale than it had in St. Bernard and Jefferson where there were no grand operations that existed in the surrounding parishes. Governor Long may have used the raids as a convenient way for the governor to break his alliance with the editor of the *States*, Colonel Robert Ewing.⁷⁰ Ewing an early supporter of Long, did not deliver as much support in 1928 as promised. Huey knew he would need a strong city organization for elections to come. To fill that void the governor found a new possible replacement in siding with the association of commerce and similar organizations in the city of New Orleans. With the raids being well received by civic and religious groups in the New Orleans area, the governor knew it would impress his supporters throughout the state.⁷¹

Adjutant General Fleming believed that the governor acted sincerely in his want to end gambling in St. Bernard and Jefferson parish. Gambling houses in Orleans parish did not operated in the open as they did in the other two parishes. According to General Fleming, the governor realized from the beginning that he had a powerful tool in the National Guard, and that nothing in the state could compete with the guard. He also said that Huey Long never gave the National Guard an unreasonable order and if he had he, (the general) would not have carried those orders out. According to General Fleming, "His, (Huey's) greatest fault was, he was absolutely bent on getting things done, and getting them done in a hurry. Things he felt would benefit the masses."⁷² The general continued, "I have known most of the big men of the U. S. In my years in the National Guard I probably knew every governor and every member of congress and every cabinet official, probably, and Long had the best mind of any mind of any man I ever met. He was, as I began to know him more and more, a marvelous mind."⁷³

Conclusion

In both St. Bernard and Jefferson, the sheriff was the key law enforcement official. Gambling could not have existed in either parish without the sheriffs looking the other way. Sheriff Meraux lived only a few blocks away from one of the largest gambling halls in the parish. He even testified as a character witness for one of his deputies accused of assault. The sheriff testified that he knew the man operated a house of prostitution and an illegal lottery, but he was a good man. Conveniently, whenever a gambling house in St. Bernard or Jefferson reopened following a raid, the sheriff's were usually out of town most likely fishing. The *Times-Picayune* published an article which suggested that the best way to solve the gambling problem was to construct fishing ponds at the expense of the parish or state in the vicinity of gambling halls.⁷⁴

The sheriffs in both St. Bernard and Jefferson knowingly tolerated gambling in their parishes. As far back as 1916, Governor Luther Hall sent in troops to seize gambling paraphernalia. Raids were conducted periodically for decades and gambling houses reopened soon after. Once the Louisiana State police progressed from strictly a highway patrol force they took over the fight against gambling. When public pressure shut down operations temporarily the clubs would reopen even stronger than before the raids.

Convictions on gambling charges were rare in the 1920s. It was nearly impossible for police to gather enough evidence to convict gamblers. To get a

successful conviction the state had to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that a person being charged took two or more bets on a horse race. And the courts had also ruled that a parish could not revoke a state - issued charter. A charter club could be raided and shutdown and then reopen under the same charter. Conviction rates were low. In 1922, 245 cases of operating a handbook were brought before the courts. There were only three convictions. In 1923, 181 cases were presented and resulted in only two convictions.⁷⁵

It was not until the 1950s that the gambling clubs in St. Bernard again came under fire. U.S. Attorney John N. McKay claimed that vice was rampant in St. Bernard and other parish in Louisiana, St. Bernard Sheriff C.F. Rowley responded that the government in effect legalized gambling by taxing it. Rowley said: "The federal government sells \$150 licenses for slot machines and \$50 licenses to lottery vendors and bookmakers. Then the state government charges \$100 for a slot machine license. In my opinion these fees legalize gambling."⁷⁶ He further stated, "I think this law is the damndest thing I have ever heard of. The government sells me a license, gets my name and address and the next day he turns me up and tells the police where I'm at. I'm too thick in the head to understand something like that."⁷⁷

Along with Sheriff Rowley, three other local officials responded to McKay's charges that vice was rampant in their parishes. Iberia Parish Sheriff Gilbert Ozenne along with Mayor Armand Viator of New Iberia responded to charges that prostitution was rampant in the parish. In response to McKay's charges of prostitution, Mayor

Viator responded "it certainly does. We know it is against the law but we figure it is the lesser of two evils."⁷⁸

Police Superintendent of New Orleans Joseph L. Sheuering was the fourth official to respond to the charges levied by U.S. Attorney McKay. Sheuering denied any accusation that the Orleans Parish officials looked the other way at either gambling or prostitution. According to the superintendent, "Gambling has been as effectively bottled up in New Orleans as ever before in history."⁷⁹ With the close proximity and openness of operation of the clubs in Arabi, residents in New Orleans did not have to travel far to fill their craving for vices. During prohibition Al Capone and gangsters of lesser stature would frequent the gambling clubs in Arabi as they awaited the delivery of their whisky shipments from down river.⁸⁰

As time went on, so too did the practice of illegal gambling in the city of New Orleans and surrounding parishes. With no geographic divide separating New Orleans from either Jefferson or St. Bernard, crossing an imaginary line could make a world of difference to anyone in the gaming industry. Instead of dealing with the bureaucracy of the big city a gambler in either St. Bernard or Jefferson Parish could cross the street pay off a local sheriff and operate at his pleasure. The willingness of gaming clientele from Orleans Parish to take the trip across parish lines made the rewards outweigh the risk for the operators of the clubs in St. Bernard and Jefferson.. While the raids did provide a climax to the efforts to fight illegal gambling during the 1920s they also show the ineffectiveness in trying rid the public of a "problem," that the majority of the people either wanted or were perfectly willing to tolerate. Corrupt leadership and

public toleration allowed illegal gambling to operate in Orleans, Jefferson and St. Bernard Parishes throughout the 1920s and into the decades that followed.

Gambling Gear Feeds Flames



The pieces of battered dice tables were excellent fuel for two fires which the militia maintained at Jackson Barracks following raids on gambling establishments in Jefferson parish Wednesday night. The top picture shows National Guardsmen throwing gaming paraphernalia on one of the fires. A view of the second fire, with Guardsmen in the foreground, is shown by the bottom picture.

THEN AND NOW

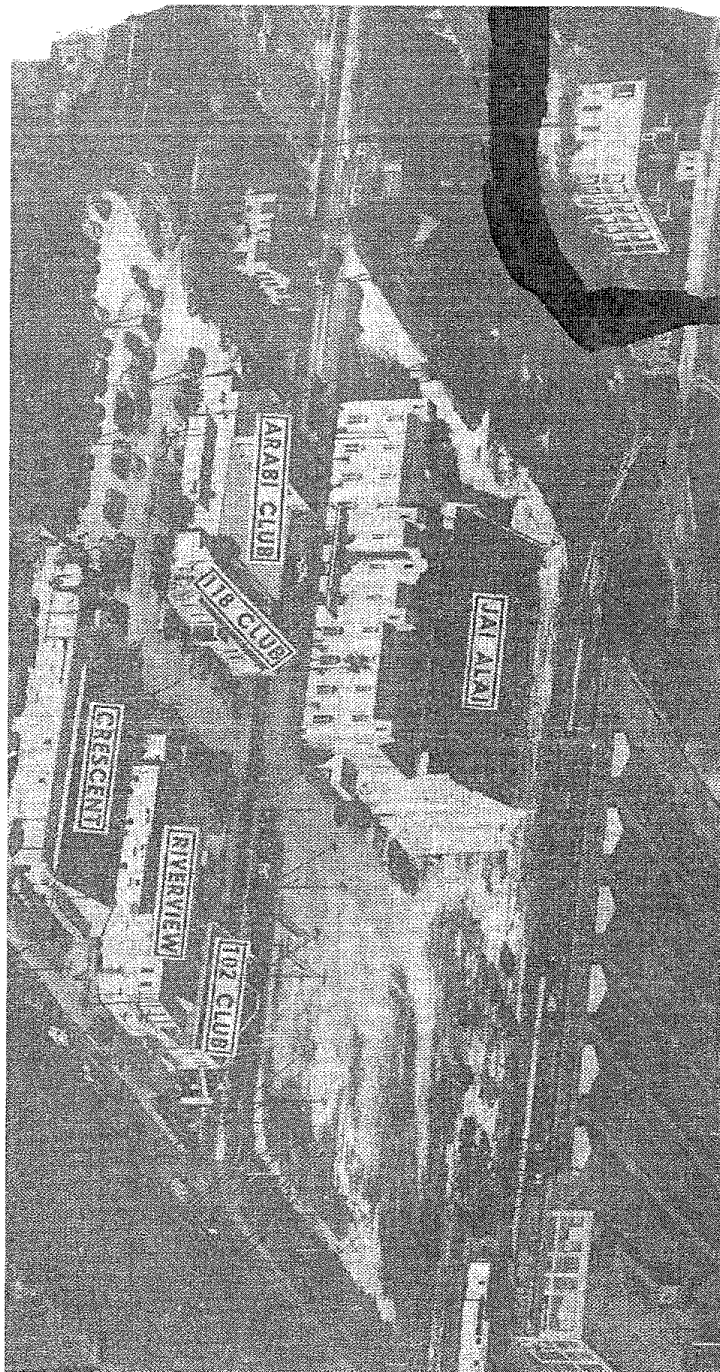


1940'S PHOTO OF THE FRONT OF THE
JAI ALAI CLUB ON FRISCOVILLE
AVENUE IN THE 1940'S (LEFT)

2002 PHOTO OF THE JAI ALAI PARKING
SIGN IN FRONT OF THE D.A.V. HALL ON
FRISCOVILLE AVENUE. THIS IS ALL THAT
REMAINS OF THE JAI ALAI CASINO
COMPLEX



AERIAL PHOTO TAKEN
IN THE 1940'S. LEBEAU
HOUSE IS IN THE
UPPER LEFT CORNER,
GAMBLING HOUSES
ARE LABELED (JAI
ALAI, ARABI CLUB,
118 CLUB, CRESCENT,
RIVERVIEW, 102
CLUB). FORD MOTOR
PLANT IS IN UPPER
RIGHT



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¹⁸ The Isleños are the descendants of immigrants from the Canary Islands to Louisiana, Cuba, and Puerto Rico. The name islander was given to the Canary Islanders to distinguish them from Spanish mainlanders known as "peninsulares." The name evolved to the point that when addressing the Canary Islanders of Louisiana, they would be referred to as the "Isleños", or "Los Isleños." In Louisiana, the Isleños settled near New Orleans in what is today St. Bernard Parish.

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